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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 002983

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SUBJECT: POLLS SHOW ROSALES ADVANCING, BUT ABSTENTIONISM  
REMAINS STRONG

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON FOR 1.4 (D)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Pollster Alfredo Keller told PolCouns September 20 that while his latest poll indicates hard-core opposition support (32 percent) outranks that of hard-core Chavismo (25 percent), continued distrust in the electoral system will result in high abstention rates that will almost certainly allow President Chavez to win. Keller says, for example, that 68 percent of voters distrust the National Electoral Council (CNE) and he estimates that under current electoral norms only about 40 percent of voters will participate in the December 3 election. Other recently released polls from Datanalisis, Hinterlaces, and U.S. consulting firm Penn, Schoen, Berland and Associates also show declining support for Chavez' policies. Datanalisis director Luis Vicente Leon said the government's ability to outspend and distract the opposition will be at least as important a factor in Chavez' victory as abstention. The early campaign polls suggest international observation may also assist in reducing voter distrust of the electoral process. While pollsters suggest opposition challenger Manuel Rosales may be gaining some ground and fueling opposition optimism, Chavez continues to enjoy substantial support and maintain control of electoral institutions, such as the CNE, and of substantial government resources that he will use for election purposes. End Summary.

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By Many Numbers, Chavez Looks Weak. . .  
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¶2. (C) Pollster Alfredo Keller told PolCouns September 20 that results from his early September poll indicate that hard-core opposition support since March has steadily risen from 19 to 32 percent and now outranks core support for President Chavez, which has fallen from 39 percent to 25 percent. These are hard-core Chavistas becoming more "Chavista lite." Keller said deteriorating support for Chavez stems in part from disagreement with recent policies, such as arms purchases, alliances with rogue states, and oil agreements, all of which have a 50 percent rejection rate or higher. In addition, voters appear more divided than before over whether Chavez is the best president for them: 47

percent say yes, while 50 percent disagree. A similar split was registered when respondents were asked whether people in their communities were content (43 percent) or depressed (45 percent) about their current situation.

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. . .But Continued Voter Distrust Favors Chavez  
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¶3. (C) This seeming shift in Chavez' support has not translated into votes for opposition challenger Manuel Rosales who, according to Keller, trails Chavez in intention to vote responses 29 to 53 percent. Keller said this was mainly due to voter doubts about the electoral system, which has encouraged abstention. Keller said 68 percent of respondents distrust the National Electoral Council (CNE) and roughly 66 percent believe or suspect that the Tascon List or a similar future list could be used against them or their families if they vote against Chavez. The government is deliberately fueling these fears. Under current electoral norms, 71 percent of respondents to Keller's poll said they would vote in the December 3 presidential election, while 84 percent said they would participate under new, and presumably, improved conditions. Keller's model, which assumes that approximately 30 percent who say they will vote will not, projects abstention around 60 percent under current conditions and just below 50 percent under improved election rules.

¶4. (C) Keller said that while focus groups indicate that more Chavistas favor abstention, the trend is worse within the opposition and that at least half (16 percent) of hard-core opposition supporters favor abstention. If electoral conditions do not improve, Keller estimated Rosales -- despite having more hard-core support -- would lose to Chavez 60 percent to 19 percent.

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Other Polls Tend to Agree  
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¶5. (C) In the past weeks, other polling results suggest similar trends in Chavez' support and Rosales' hurdles. Datanalisis Director Luis Vicente Leon told PolCouns September 8 that his firm's latest poll, taken two weeks after Rosales launched his campaign, showed the opposition challenger off to a slow start polling 16 percent in intention to vote compared to 57 percent for Chavez. Still, Leon was confident that Rosales would probably win over the approximately 20 percent of opposition abstentionists to re-capture the 40 percent the opposition had in 2004, with a little work. Leon, like Keller, also showed Chavez ranking low in addressing voter concerns about crime, unemployment, housing, and corruption, as well as, voter rejection of Chavez' radical international agenda and recent arms purchases.

¶6. (C) Leon also warned that Venezuela's economic reality worked against Rosales. Datanalisis found that the financial liquidity of the D and E classes has risen under Chavez. As Leon put it, people know the country is deteriorating and disagree with giving away Venezuelan money and oil, but as long as they are getting something out of the government, they aren't going "to change horses in mid-stream."

¶7. (C) Polling results from U.S. consulting firm Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates (PS&B), an adviser to Rosales, also showed negative performance ratings for Chavez' government. However, they registered a 37 percent intention to vote for Rosales, higher than Keller or Leon's results. According to a Rosales adviser, the PS&B poll allowed respondents to register their preferences without revealing them openly to interviewers. Meanwhile Hinterlaces polling firm's latest poll taken from August 24 to September 3 shows

intention to vote for Chavez just under 48 percent compared to that of Rosales, which is near 30 percent. Interestingly, the change in voting intention between Hinterlaces' most recent poll and one taken in late July/early August suggests Rosales picked up at least half (11 percent) of other opposition candidates' voter support while most of the other half moved to the undecided camp. In a September 20 El Nacional article, Hinterlaces Director Oscar Schemel said about 46 percent of voters consider themselves "ni-ni's," or voters not aligned with either party. Only thirty percent of this group leans toward Chavez, he said.

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Implications for Rosales' Strategy  
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¶8. (C) All recent poll results suggest Rosales is hitting the right campaign themes by emphasizing proposals for reducing crime and unemployment, tapping into discontent with corruption and Chavez' oil diplomacy, and reaching out to all Venezuelans. Leon highlighted corruption, in particular, as a good theme for demoralizing the Chavista base because it shows Chavez' inability to change a major flaw of the dominant political parties that preceded him. Keller and Leon were split on the effectiveness of Rosales' "Dare to" ("Atrevete") campaign theme, however. Keller praised the mantra for conveying a much-needed sense of encouragement to frustrated voters and thought it would help reduce abstention. Leon agreed such hope was necessary, but cautioned that the theme also reminded people, especially business owners and government employees, that they have a lot to lose if they were to support Rosales and he lost.

¶9. (C) Given the voters' profound distrust in the electoral system, Leon and Keller agreed with Rosales' strategy of an initial low profile fight for electoral conditions. If conditions did not change by late November, however, Keller told us he had advised Rosales to withdraw from the race citing unfair conditions, rather than face a humiliating 60-19 loss. Keller said Rosales rejected his advice and told him it was his intention to see the race through to the end.

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Few Implications for Chavez  
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¶10. (C) Leon saw Chavez' continued social spending and distraction of voters from real issues -- partly by scapegoating the United States -- as a winning recipe for

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victory. In addition, both pollsters expected Chavez to continue sowing seeds of doubt in the electoral system -- by warning people, for example, that he will know who votes -- since the resulting abstention would hurt the opposition more than Chavistas. Neither thought the BRV would count all of the paper receipts on voting day, which 86 percent of respondents to Keller's poll said was important for a fair vote, or withdraw the fingerprint (digital scanning) machines.

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Looking Beyond December 3  
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¶11. (C) Keller and Datanalisis questions about post-election expectations indicate that the margin of victory and, in the event he loses, Rosales' response to defeat will determine the opposition's prospects for rebuilding in 2007. If Rosales loses consistent with Keller's worse case scenario with 19 percent, the pollster believes the opposition would be debilitated for several years to come. Keller found that 43 percent of opposition supporters were prepared to emigrate, most likely he said to Miami, if Rosales lost, which seems an exaggeration. Leon thought that if Rosales lost with 40 percent of the vote, accepted defeat gracefully,

and vowed to continue to work within the electoral system, the opposition could retain momentum, particularly if they wanted to pursue recall referenda against Chavista governors and mayors.

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Comment  
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¶12. (C) While it is still more than two months until the election, the differences between Datanalisis' poll and the others, which were taken later, indicate that Rosales may be gaining ground. Despite opposition optimism, it will be extremely difficult for him to overcome the government's deep coffers, Chavez' control of the electoral apparatus, and persistent voter suspicion of the electoral system. The results also suggest international observers may help to restore some faith in the electoral process, reducing at least one of Rosales' hurdles.

BROWNFIELD